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Documenting Local History: Using the Library of Congress Site, Primary Sources, and Community Resources for Teaching Social Studies

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Introduction to Teaching with Primary Sources

Using primary source artifacts and documents has long been considered “best practice” for teaching social sciences content. Historians understand the importance of connecting original items for the construction of “whole” stories of people, places, and events (Danzer & Newman, 1991). The challenge for educators is to provide authentic learning experiences for the teaching and learning of Social Studies and all content areas.

Every human being creates primary sources throughout their lifetime. Primary sources are records of existence. Throughout our lives, we communicate and create a myriad of documents such as letters, journals, birth announcements, photographs in a family album, records of vacations, and art work that children have created through their school years. Primary source artifacts are original records of people, places, events, and objects. Some primary sources have specific dates labeling them as to their origination and others can be connected to a general timeline (Pardieck, 2008).

The local history research project evolved out of a federally-funded initiative through the Federation of Illinois Independent Colleges and Universities. The Teaching with Primary Sources (TPS) project was composed of four participating higher education institutions in the State of Illinois. The objective of the project was to aid educators’ with the use of the Library of Congress digital primary sources. TPS combines technology and the history/social studies curriculum, in an effort to assist with the use and creation of learning activities.

The intent of the TPS project was to provide PreK-12 preservice and inservice teachers with tools necessary to enhance students’ skills as they analyze photographs, make personal connections, use map and location skills, work with informational texts, and create projects using primary sources for teaching and learning in the content areas. To this end, all resulting instructional practices integrated primary source materials from the Library of Congress website, www.loc.gov.

During the 2011-12 academic school year, a central Illinois junior high school and a private university initiated a partnership to create a local history research project. Through a grant from the



Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources Project at the Federation of Independent Illinois Colleges and Universities, school teachers and university professors collaborated to identify potential primary sources to research and to design the inquiry's final product for the project. With guidance from their teachers, seventh and eighth grade students engaged in research, analysis, and evaluation of primary source documents from the Library of Congress and local community archival sources. Historical inquiry included the identification of the town's origination and seminal events that occurred in the community from 1830 through 2012. Students also engaged in oral history by developing questions and conducting oral interviews of local residents. The students analyzed audio recordings, visual documents, and written primary sources to trace the growth of the town through the years, culminating in the development of a video documentary. The documentary continues to be used each year as part of the social studies curriculum in the local school district of Elmwood, Illinois.

Benefits of Researching Local History

Researching local or community history connects meaningful learning opportunities (Zemelman, Daniels & Hyde (2012) as students assign value to primary sources. Using the inquiry method, students utilize primary sources to uncover the history of their community, as they research the founding of their town and identify past cultures, traditions, and celebrations. According to the *Explore Your Community* in the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress (2015), studying the history of your hometown:

- enhances performance in interdisciplinary learning, team participation, and presentation skills.
- involves students with their families, neighborhoods, and the community around them, and increases civic awareness.
- provides opportunities for students to work with authentic information and primary source artifacts.
- builds self-esteem and pride in self, community, and cultural heritage.
- provides an opportunity for students to contribute to their community in meaningful ways.
- fosters awareness and tolerance of cultural diversity.
- encourages the interpretation, synthesis, and evaluation of various kinds of cultural information.
- strengthens inquiry skills.
- develops technological expertise and skills with documentary equipment.
- promotes school-community partnerships.
- offers learning opportunities that value each student's life and experiences.

Connecting meaning to community history is accomplished by having students engage in researching, analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating primary sources. Using original source materials strengthens instructional activities as students assume the authentic role as historians and connect real and past events, artifacts, and information about the evolution of our cultures (Newman, Spirou,



& Danzer, 2007). As primary source details emerge, students make connections to secondary sources which support the piecing together of the “big picture” (McMullen, 2009). Students make personal connections with the construction of new learning, acquire skills for interpretation of information, utilize technology skills, and experience a meaningful study of content (Petri, 2003).

Start of the Research Project

The rationale for the project was to capture the oral histories and historical artifacts of a local community, in an effort to document the research in a video format. As the population of rural communities continues to decline across the United States, the potential for capturing the history also diminishes. This project assisted with the preservation of a town’s history by guiding students as they investigated and gathered primary sources and data for present and future historians to utilize in documenting the development of their communities.

The intent of this project was to create a product that would chronicle the history of Elmwood, Illinois. Connecting the research portion of this project with the junior high school students and teachers provided an outstanding opportunity to relate the history of the small town. The focus of the project was to conduct a historical investigation by researching, analyzing, and evaluating historical information. The students would demonstrate a proficiency in integrating primary source documents and artifacts in a historical narrative and conduct an oral history inquiry through interviews with the residents of the town.

School faculty and university professors collaborated to identify possible learning objectives and resources for the year-long project. Through the facilitation of the project’s coordinator, Ms. Mary Ann Hanlin and teachers, Ms. Katie Janovitz, Ms. Wendy Coulter, and Ms. Cindy Alcaraz, the seventh and eighth grade students would research and document the town’s history. Also, the project’s information was presented to the Elmwood School Board, which fully supported the engagement of junior high school students in the community history research project.

Teachers had access to the professional development modules, classroom materials, and standards found in the Library of Congress (2017) website. Other links to online resources were provided to assist with the creation of interview questions and protocol to conduct interviews. In addition, lesson plans, WebQuests, and learning activities that were created by Bradley University preservice teachers, located at Bradley University Teaching and Learning with Primary Sources site at <http://bradleytps.weebly.com>, were made available. Teachers were also welcome to use any resources available on the Federation Teaching with Primary Sources website.

Students were introduced to the collection of documents available on the Library of Congress website to assist them with their understanding of key terms and concepts to help them to identify important information and artifacts germane to the focus of their research. Some Library of Congress online archives and collections found to be of utility in their research included the following: American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writer's Project; 1936-1940



Explore Your Community; A Community Heritage Poster for the Classroom; Learning About Immigration Through Oral History; Local Legacies, Oral History and Social History; Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural History; Veterans History Project-Questions; Folklife and Fieldwork: An Introduction to Field Techniques; Personal Stories and Primary Sources-Conversations with Elders; and Teacher's Guide-Analyzing Primary Sources.

With assistance from their teachers, students searched these online collections to identify examples of significant or important primary source documents and artifacts that would help them tell the story of how their town had grown and developed through the years. Once the students' respective research topics and potential primary sources were identified, and with the guidance from their teachers, students would investigate, identify, collect, and document full references of the primary sources (e.g., photographs, documents, books, objects, maps) their research efforts yielded. The students also took photographs of the town. Juxtaposing past and present photographs allowed the students to identify changes that took place throughout the towns' history. The final part of the inquiry would be to identify and interview members of the community and residents who have served in the conflicts and wars for our nation. The interviews would be recorded, as part of the Elmwood history project.

Funding for the Project

The Teaching with Primary Sources Project at the Federation of Independent Illinois Colleges and Universities has been in existence since 2002. In partnership with the Library of Congress, the organization has worked with preservice teachers, faculty, and school students to promote the use of primary sources and inquiry with all content area studies. They have been a repository for instructional activities and research, through their support of projects designed to enhance history education by integrating primary documents and historical inquiry into the PreK-12 teaching and learning process.

Through a grant from the Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources Project at the Federation of Independent Illinois Colleges and Universities, the project was able to purchase the following: one Pinnacle Studio Ultimate Software (for creating and editing the video documentary); one Western Digital 1 terabyte hard drive (for storing project materials); one Kodak Easy Share M530 Digital Camera (still and short video images); three FLIP Ultra HD Camcorder (video image capture); and three Dynex Flexible Tripods (for use with both still and video cameras). Students and teachers used the equipment to document the town of Elmwood's history and to create a final video recording of the results of their collective research effort. At the conclusion of the project, the school kept the electronic equipment for their future learning projects and a webmaster was hired to digitize the final multimedia product.



Community History Research Project

Before students started their research, the school and university team collaborated to identify key elements of the inquiry process that was to be employed, as well as to organize and record information, and to complete a plan of action, i.e., timeline for implementation. They outlined some of the steps in the research process and identified possible resources for research in an attempt to uncover important or significant historical information about the town.

The start of the project included opportunities for students to view and select important topics relative to the history of the town, identify the different types of primary sources that were to be used, and determine where those sources could be found, which would help to organize and guide their research plan. For example, a portrait of, or information on, a founding family may be located in the local library, school library, city hall, or church. Photographs of the town in the early twentieth century may be found in old copies of school yearbooks for comparison purposes. The team identified some of the possible topics for study, such as finding information about the founding families, identifying Elmwood's role in the Civil Rights era, festivals, businesses, immigration, religion, or the aftermath of the tornado that went through the town on June 5, 2010, leaving devastation in its path.

The early stages of the project would allow students to gather information about the founding of the town and use a variety of primary source documents, audios, visuals, journals, newspaper articles and diaries. They would also have the opportunity to compare maps from the 1830s to the current layout of the town. Research questions included the following:

- What is famous about the town or what is its greatest asset?
- Who were the original settlers?
- Why did they settle in the area, what were the benefits of the land?
- What was culture during that time period?
- How has the town changed through the years?
- Why did people stay or leave the town?

The team discussed the types of local landmarks, traditions, and customs that could be project topics. A concept map with the community at the center was created to help decide which topics to include in the final product. Students were assigned topics for the collection, recording of information, and finding primary source artifacts.

Data Collection



The collection of data was based upon the review of other town histories that were examined and the digital resources that were used provided guidance to the junior high school students' research. Students were able to view examples of important primary source artifacts that other communities assigned as significant or meaningful to tell their respective stories. Identifying the different types of primary sources would help students select important artifacts to tell the history of Elmwood.

For the data collection, students needed to investigate, gather, and document full citations of the primary sources (e.g., photos, documents, newspapers, books, maps) they located. During the investigation, students recorded the type of primary sources, author(s) and title with full references, and included links to online archival documents on a graphic organizer. Recording possible locations of primary source documents and artifacts assisted with an efficient use of time and consideration of important or significant materials for project inclusion (Pardieck, McMullen & Cantú, 2013).

During the project, the students accessed the Library of Congress website, *Veteran's History Project* (2010) to find the protocol for interviewing veterans from America's conflicts and wars. Interviewing the veterans would provide a timeline to show how history touched the daily lives of the community. In their classrooms, with guidance from their teachers, the students created permission slips for recording the information, identified and developed specific interview questions, scheduled dates and times for the interview sessions, videotaped the interviews, reviewed and edited video recordings. As a final step, the students scheduled a date for interviewees to view the completed videos.

In addition to accessing the Library of Congress website, the students went to their school's library, local library, city hall, and parks to locate important information. One of the "founding stories" they uncovered was about the family of Isaac Harkness, who settled in 1830 and the town developed around them. The John and Lucy Ewalt family came to Elmwood in 1831 and were also considered to be early settlers of the town.

Students learned that Elmwood played an important role during the Civil Rights era. Many of the early families who settled into the town were abolitionists. In addition, the students learned that African-American abolitionist, Frederick Douglass visited Elmwood in 1870. They also learned that the historic "Phelps Barn," established in 1842, served as a signal station that was used on the Underground Railroad. William Phelps, who was also an early settler in Elmwood, would light lanterns in the barn to signal the path was safe to travel. In 2003, the community members recognized the historical importance of the "Phelps Barn" and rebuilt it to preserve its history.

The junior high students visited the shops and businesses, as well as community members who had been lifelong residents of the town. Through the assistance of the project coordinator and the teachers, the students were able to identify and interview town residents who knew the local history and had served our country throughout America's conflicts and wars. The residents shared their family histories and the veterans relayed their experiences in service to our country and their return to Elmwood. As the students interviewed members of the community, they chronicled important events and major influences of the town. The students photographed the town, compared early and



current maps, and recorded their collections of artifacts. They gathered and organized their information and analyzed primary sources to identify similarities and differences in the way the town has changed throughout the years.

Toward the close of the inquiry project, students wrote a narrative about the information they found and documented the supporting, significant primary sources. The students presented their findings to a whole school assembly. The presentation was videotaped and was used as the basis for the final digital product. A webmaster was hired through the funding of the grant to create a DVD. The digital project, *The Story of Elmwood* (2012) may be viewed at <http://bradleytps.weebly.com/special-projects.html>.

Putting It All Together

The school and university research collaboration was an excellent way to initiate historical inquiry with junior high school students in an effort to learn the history of their hometown. As teachers guided their seventh and eighth grade students, they were able to make meaningful connections and analyze primary source documents and artifacts as they organized their plan for research. The grant from the Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources Project at the Federation of Independent Illinois Colleges and Universities provided the equipment needed for the recording of the project and digitizing the final multimedia presentation. Documents from the Library of Congress assisted the research efforts with organization of data, interview questions and how to conduct fieldwork, defined topics of local legacies and immigration, and provided samples of oral histories.

Students in grades 7 through 8 conducted primary source research in their hometown of Elmwood, Illinois. They learned about the types of primary sources and how to analyze the sources through the Library of Congress website. Their research involved examining period newspapers, photographs, books, and diaries through local sources. They found old photographs and maps at the town library, school library, businesses located in town, and residents of the community who shared its past history. Comparisons and meaningful connections were made as students viewed past and present historical moments and artifacts. The teachers and students documented their historical inquiry project through the collection of significant primary sources. The sources were organized and arranged in chronological order to outline the town's history.

One of the greatest lessons the students learned from their engagement in the local history project was the value of the stories told by community residents. Through the interviews, the students, as historians were able to investigate and construct the history of the town. Indeed, preservation of these stories, i.e., local history, is just as valuable as stories of family history, which are passed down from generation to generation. As Dean Cantù noted in a recent issue of *Continuance Magazine* (2017):



Specifically, as students and teachers of history we must recognize the sacrifices and challenges, as well as the triumphs and achievements, we have experienced as individuals, as a society, and as a nation. These shared stories serve as a common thread that binds the patchwork quilt, which is the United States of America. In the same manner, the stories that are passed down from one generation to the next, must be captured for posterity, not only so we may better understand and acknowledge the obstacles family [and community] members who have come before us have encountered in their lives, but also to truly appreciate and celebrate their accomplishments, which serve to inspire generations that follow.... We all owe it to our ancestors, as well as to our descendants, to both gather/capture these stories before they are irretrievably lost, as well as to preserve/tell these stories to the younger generations who will be entrusted to preserve them, as well. This will allow us to be both students and teachers of our own family [and community] histories, which are stories worth telling--indeed, stories worth telling well for generations to come.

At the conclusion of the project, the students wrote a narrative about their research inquiry. They presented their story and supporting primary source artifacts to the students and faculty during an all school assembly. The presentation was video recorded, as well as the interviews of town residents, using the inquiry method and student-created interview protocol. Through funding from the Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources Project at the Federation of Independent Illinois Colleges and Universities, the final video of the project was a cumulative, multimedia presentation. The DVD included narration, titles, dates, captions, music, and interviews with town residents. Since the initial viewing, the video has been used every year as part of the social studies curriculum in the school.

Resources

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